

Fusion: The Circle of Life

Jason Charlie

Philosophy

Supervisor: Jenna Woodrow

Abstract:

Through naturalistic observation and analyses of the powwow dance, I was able to witness Native epistemology, first hand. In this paper, I will explore this epistemology. The teaching method of Native culture is their ontology, and has been passed from generation-to-generation, and is their way of life; it is a way of showing and doing—providing essential life skills. This practice—a way of living—emphasized the importance of communication, cooperation, and interaction. In that sense, there are other underlying dynamics—the energy—presenting itself to enhance peoples' wellbeing through their interrelatedness, their interdependence, and their interconnection. In their ceremony, nothing is as it seems; the energy generated underneath, while dancing, brought the Indigenous people together in unity. And, from another perspective, the reuniting of the people fulfilled, through action, psychological needs by conversion of energy. Native epistemology also permits children to discover life for themselves—to explore and create their own paradise, in conformity with the Sacred Circle, like their ancestors—dancing and creating their own universe.

On the gym floor, I see the people creating their own universe. At the Tiny Tots' 4th annual Powwow, I am standing on top of the bleachers, and I am watching an ancient way of knowing and being—of teaching. There is a large gathering of Indigenous people on the gymnasium floor, and they are practicing an ancient custom of singing and dancing. They are

demonstrating to the people a pristine way of life—a way to live a life that is filled with caring, kindness, joy, unity, and love. The showing-how to live is not complex; it is simple Native epistemology. There is no right or wrong, only the necessity to do, when shown. I see the dancers: ladies dancing the traditional, the fancy, and the jingle dress. I see the men dancing the traditional and the warrior dance. The Indigenous people are expressing their language and culture—expressing their worldview—singing and dancing—passing these traditions onto the next generation. They are bringing people—life—back to the Sacred Circle.

On the floor, they are bonding and creating their own universe—focusing their thoughts and energy. I am drawn to this place where no harm can come to a person; everything is in unity because they are showing their essence. The particles of light are dancing. I feel the energy around me—the positive, pulsating energy arising from the drum, the singing, and the one nation on the dance floor—emanating from their heart and soul. I use Einstein’s theory of relativity—energy converts to matter; it cannot be created or destroyed because it is shared, and it makes up this vast universe. The experience of being on the floor—dancing—and the demonstration by the older males nurtures a child’s growth; the positive energy stays with the children. The sharing and caring is stored in their implicit memory. The love that is created is light, our actions, being shown to the world. Helen Steiner Rice reiterates those sentiments in her poem. She states, “The meaning of true love: it is sharing and caring, giving and forgiving, loving and being loved, walking hand-in-hand...For love that is being shared is a beautiful thing. It enriches the soul and makes the heart sing” (inspirational card, 2008). The people are focusing on much more than what can be seen.

I am watching this ceremony and I see what Seeds and Backman (2013) describe: “atoms that collide may form bonds with each other by exchanging or sharing electrons. Two or more

atoms bonded together form a molecule” (p. 128). The energy they are creating—the binding energy—is a ceremony to give thanks and honour our spirit helpers; also, it is to merge the physical and spiritual realm—creating awareness and an esoteric oneness. The knowing is in our souls; it is the feeling. The ceremony shows our gratitude and appreciation for all life, and it is a call for wisdom and guidance.

I like what Bertrand Russell (1912) said: “Philosophy...has at least the power of asking questions which increase the interest of the world, and show the strangeness and wonder lying just below the surface even in the commonest things of daily life” (cited in Pojman, 2003, p. 8). His view is consistent with that of my ancestors: the world is made up of energy. Underneath the illusions, there is life—something that is beautiful, spiritual, wonderful, and miraculous. Seeds and Backman (2013) state, “Now you can consider a common misconception.” Most people, without thinking about it much, imagine that matter is solid, but you have seen that atoms are mostly empty space. The chair you sit on, the floor you walk on, are mostly not there” (p. 128). They, the matter, are particles of light that make up this universe. Seeds & Backman (2013) also state “Light has both wavelength and particle-like properties, and how it behaves depends partly on how you treat it....Radiation refers to anything that radiates from a source” (p. 101). The singers and dancers are exciting those tiny atoms of the participants and filling that empty space. According to Seeds and Backman, (2013), “Electromagnetic radiation can act as a wave phenomenon—that is, it is associated with a periodically repeating disturbance, a wave, which carries energy” (p. 101). The light generated— interweaving strands—is connecting people to the web of life.

What I saw at the powwow was one voice, one nation, conjoined—moving forward. They were fusing their energy and weaving the web of life, constantly enlightening the spirit within.

Woodrow (2013) states, “No point in looking at individual knots in a fishing net. It is the strings between the knots that make the whole function” (PowerPoint, 2013). The people were reaching out and teaching the young about togetherness. I saw a raging fire: the flames flickering, dancing, and prancing—light chasing away and illuminating the darkness—in all directions, but still a part of a merging flame. Wilson (2008) states, “Constructivism takes the ontology of a fluid reality one step further in the belief that there is not merely one fluid reality, but many realities specific to the people and locations that hold them. Reality then is what you make it to be” (p. 37). The people are using this avenue—the powwow—to find out who they really are, their true selves. Our ancestors, the light, live inside of us all. Teaching the young about who they are is giving them their identity, instilling pride and integrity. When they learn their history, they will remember who they are and it will give them direction, wisdom, and guidance. The people were awakening an inner-desire that sought fulfillment. Seeds & Backman (2013) state, “An atom is mostly empty space” (p. 127). An Elder, George Thunder, once told me that when you pray you are asking for energy. So, with praying—giving thanks—we are asking to fill that space with awesome energy, love-energy.

I reiterate the sentiment that the world is made up of energy, and the Native people knew how to utilize it to the best of their ability; they live and experience that life of caring, sharing, and loving life unconditionally. Their actions and focus spoke those views, and every one of them was a leader in their own way. When they prayed to the four cardinal directions, they were praying to the Grandfather, Grandmother Spirits because each spirit holds a special, different unique element. The people called upon them for wisdom and guidance to help strengthen the circle. One time, I heard a wise Elder say when we focus on something we give it energy. When

we are kind to others we are giving energy to those people. Values convert to energy, and energy is psychological needs fulfilling; people need to feel included, to be a part of something.

In fusion, smaller atomic nuclei fuse to combine and form more massive nuclei. Seeds and Backman (2013) state, “The molecules and atoms in any object are in constant motion, and in a hot object they are more agitated than in a cool object. You can refer to this agitation as thermal energy” (p. 131). Through their singing and dancing, they were connecting and enhancing their relationships on both physical and spiritual levels. Wilson (2008) says, “The interaction between the investigator [individual explorers] and the subjects [singers and dancers] is the key to this epistemology, with reality made up of socially constructed concepts that are shared. The goal is a coming together between researcher and subjects to create a mutual reality and to find common meaning in the natural world” (p. 37). In this atmosphere, the people are, mutually, illuminating the circle of life. Their presence and participation builds relationships, balancing heart and mind.

I often hear from my Elders that the children are our future; the next generation will carry on our traditions and lead—unifying all people. When I was observing the men’s traditional dance, I saw a child, not much older than five years old, dancing and copying the men. The people did not try to move him off the floor because the men, and the rest of the people, wanted that child to learn on his own accord, to make his own choice. This is our way of passing on traditional knowledge; the old ones show how things are done, and the younger generation are left to figure things out for themselves. In this way, the young are free to develop their own individual expression, but in a structured manner that conforms to the sacredness of the whole. In this sense, there is one difference between an Elder and an instructor: an instructor gives you all the materials and an Elder will only show or tell you a teaching, one time.

While watching all the people on the gym floor, I saw the circle of life illuminate those individual cells—bringing light to the world. Governor General David Johnston (2011) stated, “History shows that advancement comes from rich and intense collaboration... The candle represents enlightenment. When you light your candle from my candle, my candle is not diminished, it is enhanced” (guest speaker at Yukon College). I saw the people enlightening and sharing their traditions with the world to help others elevate their lives. It was like what Wilson (2008) stated, “knowledge ...is not seen as the ultimate goal, rather the goal is the change that this knowledge may help to bring about....[R]esearch is not seen as worthy or ethical if it does not help to improve the reality of the research participants” (p. 37). The passing, and learning of their own accord, of knowledge helps empower their intrinsic ability to sustain positive growth.

An old friend told me that there are two things needed for wisdom—experience and teachings. Experience without teachings is a life of chaos, and teachings without experience are just words. These two concepts cupped together make for wisdom. And, as I was watching the performers, I saw them providing teachings to all people and the choice being given to the people was theirs to make if they wanted to experience and open up to the light, the love. And, this (2013) “flows from tribal knowledge. Information gained through *relationship*—with people in a specific place, *with* traditional understanding and culture, *with* the source of the research information, and *with* people who tell the story that provides information” (Woodrow, PowerPoint).

At the powwow, some people may think it is just singing and dancing, but some see it differently, as philosopher Bertrand Russell (1912) states: “The one thing we know about it is that it is not what it seems” (as cited in *The Theory of knowledge*, p. 8). The performances are, on a much deeper level, a way to pass on an ancient custom. Wilson (2008) states, “It is a

ceremony for improving your relationship with an idea. It takes place every day and has taken place throughout our history” (p. 110). The ideas enhance and enrich one’s own perspective on his or her relationship with one’s self, with one’s environment, and with the universe. They teach about the circle of life. While watching the people, I saw them representing a symbol—a symbol of the Creator. The circle, which is a symbol of creation, is also symbolic of who we are as a people. I learned the Creator resides in me and all other life. The performers, and the light they teach about, represent the love-energy from the Great Spirit. They show how to live and behave accordingly to the Creator’s law.

The Indian, Indigenous, Native ways of knowing come from the same source, the heart, and it is not opaque but common sense—a way to live, a relationship with all life. Wilson (2008) iterates, “Reality is not an object but a process of relationships, and an Indigenous ontology is actually the equivalent of Indigenous epistemology” (Wilson, p. 73). This shared reality is an outlook to build and strengthen relationships. Woodrow (2008) reiterates Wilson’s view: In Indigenous “epistemology ... the relationship with something (a person, object or idea) is more important than the thing itself” (p. 73). The people understood the importance of relaying essential *life-giving* information; they did that to keep the circle strong.

It takes a community to raise a child, and starts with the elders. They are the experienced ones; the knowledge they possess has been passed down from generation to generation. The knowledge continues to trickle down to their children, nieces, nephews, and then the grandchildren. The Indigenous knowledge-experiential approach differs from a Western knowledge system. I think the only thing complex about an Indigenous approach is whatever teaching a person is presented with is that he or she has to figure the problem out on his or her own, but it has to function, in accordance, with the holistic concept: living. The young were

taught, whatever it may be, only once so they could develop, through practice, their own skills—learning through trial and error and to think for themselves. The children were given guidance, but only to a certain point; in this way, patience, and other intrinsic life-sustaining skills were cultivated in the child. All, mostly, were that of a hands-on approach which was contrary to Western systems of knowledge.

Indigenous people have always performed ceremony to honour and give thanks for being a part of something that is really, really great: life. Their ways of knowing and being are inherent; they live life from the heart. And it is legitimized by the fact that Native epistemology has survived—passed down—from time immemorial. This recognition by dominant Western systems of knowledge has only been recent. They are integrating Indigenous concepts, curriculum, and activities into the mainstream educational system. Thompson Rivers University and many other universities are setting precedents by incorporating an ancient knowledge system. They are slowly starting to understand that ceremony—the Tiny Tots’ Powwow—is the circle of life. That everything a person needs to learn to know is in the Circle. The participants at the Powwow were demonstrating the Creator’s way of life—giving light to the world by singing, dancing and filling the empty space. The Powwow is another way of Native Epistemology; it teaches the participants and helps balance the four aspects of their being—simultaneously exciting the atoms of the mental, the emotional, the physical, and the spiritual—helping them grow and love. “When you are more loving, the more intelligent you become” (Keisha Crowther, 2010). The fusing of relationships, of ideas, of knowledge, and of ontology presents a Native way of life. In retrospect, the legitimacy of holistically living has been passed down through ceremony, story, and language; it is a natural way of life.

References

- Pojman, L.P. (2003). *The theory of knowledge: Classical and contemporary readings*. (3rd ed.). Wadsworth, Cengage Learning. Belmont, CA.
- Seeds, M.A. & Backman, D. E. (2013). *Stars and galaxies* (8th ed.). Brooks/Cole, Cengage Learning. Boston, MA.
- Wilson, S. (2008). *Research is ceremony: Indigenous research methods*. Fernwood Publishing. Black Point, Nova Scotia.